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ABSTRACT

This 3-year study examined a communicative language teaching (CLT) program within a Taiwanese elementary school, investigating whether the program would improve students' English skills, which variables would account for improved English skills, whether participating students would enjoy the program, and implications for teaching English in other Taiwanese elementary schools. A total of 134 fourth graders participated for 3 years in English language lessons taught by both Taiwanese and American native speakers of English. Teachers were trained in CLT and agreed to implement a CLT program within their school. Researchers observed the classes. Students completed pretests and posttests of oral, reading, and writing skills. Students also completed pre- and post-intervention interviews about their experiences with English. At the end of the third year, all 134 students completed written surveys on their perceptions of the quality of their English teaching program. Results indicated that students showed improvement in the development of all examined aspects of their English language skills. Variables influencing their improved English skills included having previously attended after-school classes in language centers and being satisfied with English classes. Most students enjoyed their CLT English classes. (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

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Applying Communicative Language Teaching in a Taiwanese Elementary School

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As Taiwan begins to teach English in elementary schools, teachers and administrators must wrestle with many important issues. How should English be taught in elementary schools? If English were to be taught communicatively, would the students learn it well? How would the students accept communicative language teaching? How would the teachers implement it? What kinds of problems might develop in its implementation? This paper explores these and other issues by reporting the results of a 3-year case study involving a communicative language teaching program in a Taiwanese elementary school.

INTRODUCTION

With the recent decision to begin teaching English in elementary schools throughout Taiwan, questions must be raised about how best to achieve this goal. Should students be taught English using a traditional, grammar-based approach, or should they be taught in a more communicative way? This paper reports the results of a 3-year case study involving elementary school students in Taiwan who learned English communicatively in their elementary school. It is hoped that the results of this study might help others to plan the development of English language programs for Taiwanese elementary school children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been written about Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Briefly, its major principles include the notion that the purpose of learning a language is to communicate meaning. Therefore, language teaching should encourage learning through

communication of personally relevant ideas and messages (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983; Li, 1984; Nunan, 1989; Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Although use of the native language and translation may be used in the classroom, communication in the target language should begin at the earliest stages of the learning process (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983).

The study of grammar also has a place in CLT (Littlewood, 1981; Nunan, 1989). Some proponents of CLT have acknowledged the value of limited drilling to encourage the learning of grammar (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983). However, within the CLT tradition, there appears to be a general consensus that grammar in particular—and language in general—should be learned within the context of real-life, meaningful communicative events (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983; Li, 1984; Littlewood, 1981; Nunan, 1991; Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

As Li (1984) points out, CLT is a student-centered approach in which students enjoy freedom to express their own ideas and to participate in determining the development of lessons. As such, the teacher's control of classroom events is more limited than in traditional approaches of language teaching. This delivers an element of unpredictability to lessons.

Some scholars question the appropriateness of CLT in Chinese classrooms. Within this context, there appears to be an expectation among students and teachers that instruction should focus on teaching discrete grammatical points and in emphasizing accuracy of language use (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Hird, 1995; Li, 1984; Maley, 1983; Penner, 1985). To accomplish this, teacher-centered instruction often predominates (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Hird, 1995; Li, 1984; Matalene, 1985; Penner, 1985). Focusing lessons upon the detailed study of an assigned textbook is routine (Burnaby & Sun, 1989;

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Hird, 1995; Li, 1984; Penner, 1985). In addition, emphasis is placed on memorization (Li, 1984; Maley, 1983; Matalene, 1985; Penner, 1985). Not surprisingly, CLT tasks are generally not regarded as a serious learning activity (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Li, 1984; Maley, 1983).

Within the specific context of Taiwan, a similar situation might also apply. Beginning in elementary school, students are expected to learn through memorization, which is encouraged by frequent testing (Peng, 1993; Smith, 1989). To promote learning, instruction often occurs within highly controlled, teacher-centered classrooms (Cheng, 1993; Peng, 1993; Smith, 1989). Choral readings are a frequently used method of instruction (Cheng, 1993). Within this classroom environment, students are generally expected to obey the teacher's direction and to avoid being disruptive (Barclay & Wu, 1977; Peng, 1993; Smith, 1989).

Given the potential differences between principles of CLT and the realities of Chinese classrooms, this study was developed to examine the effects of implementing it in a Chinese (Taiwanese) elementary school.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design

The following research questions guided the study: (1)Would students enrolled in the CLT program improve their English skills? (2) Which variables might account for the improvement of English skills for students enrolled in the CLT program? (3) Would students enrolled in the CLT program enjoy it? Which aspects of it would they like and dislike? (4) What implications might this study have for the teaching of English in other elementary schools in Taiwan

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The study followed a pre-test/post-test design, in which student participants were randomly selected from among a population of 240 fourth-graders, all of whom were taught English in elementary school for 3 hours each week for 3 years. .

All told, 134 participants completed both pre-tests and post-tests of the oral skill component of the study. Pre-tests were administered in the fall of the first year and post-tests were administered to the same students 3 years later. Out of these 134 participants, 53 were randomly selected and completed both the pre-tests and the post-tests of the reading and writing components of the study. Limitations of time and resources precluded the testing of all 134 participants in all skill areas.

Brief interviews were conducted with each participant by the first researcher in the beginning and the end of the study. During the interviews, the participants were asked to describe their prior experience with English, their prior experience living in English-speaking countries, and their participation in English language centers. At the end of the third year, all 134 students were also asked to complete open-ended written surveys to gauge their perceptions of the quality of their English-teaching program in elementary school.

Teaching

Each week the students were taught English for 3 class hours. In 2 hours they were taught by Taiwanese speakers of English and in the third hour they were taught by a native speaker of English from the United States. All four of the Taiwanese English teachers who participated in this study were certified, full-time public school teachers who held at least a bachelor's degree in English or linguistics. Three of them held

master's degrees. When not teaching English to the elementary school students, they were often teaching English classes to junior high or high school students.

All of the five American teachers held bachelor's degrees, but none of them held advanced degrees in English or a related field. Three of the five were certified, full-time public school teachers. When not teaching English to the elementary school children of the Science-Based Park's Experimental School, they worked primarily as social studies teachers in the adjacent Science-Based Park's Bilingual School. As for the other two American English teachers, they spent most of their time teaching children and adults in private classes in the local area.

Prior to the beginning of classes in the fall, all of the participating teachers agreed to implement a communicative language teaching program for grades 4-6 at the Science-based Park's Experimental School. In-service workshops and meetings were arranged prior to the first year to study and discuss ways of implementing CLT within the context of a Taiwanese elementary school. Although each class would include 40 students, the English teachers attempted to apply as many CLT tasks in their teaching as possible, using activities such as pair work, information-gap games, role plays, story telling, picture story writing, letters to parents, letters to classmates, and the like. Lectures and drills—although useful—would be limited as much as possible. The teachers also committed themselves to using English as the primary language of instruction.

To monitor the implementation of CLT, the first researcher observed 25 hours of English classes during the 3-year study: 8 hours in the first year, 10 hours in the second year, and 7 hours in the third year. The researcher attended and observed instruction at the invitation of the teachers. Applying the Foreign Language Interaction Analysis

(FLINT) System (Moskowitz, 1971), the researcher confirmed a determined and effective effort on the part of the teachers to implement CLT in their classrooms. Although results varied from teacher to teacher, tasks embracing open-ended student response and student-initiated use of English averaged 40% of class time in the first year, 50% in the second year, and 60% in the third year. There was no evidence to suggest that the American teachers used more CLT tasks or spent more time on CLT tasks than their Taiwanese colleagues

Assessments

Two standardized instruments were used in this study. The Second Language Oral Test of English (SLOTE) is an individually administered assessment of oral English skills that can be used with children in elementary school (Fathman, 1981). Using drawings as prompts for speech, it examines the use of grammar and sentence patterns. The Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery-Revised (WLPB-R) is an individually administered comprehensive assessment of English skills that can be used with children in elementary schools (Woodcock, 1991). Its use is also recommended for non-native speakers of English. Four clusters of the WLPB-R were used in this study, with each cluster consisting of two related skill tests. Two clusters examined reading skills and two examined writing skills.

Near the end of the third year, participants of the study were given open-ended survey forms, in which they were asked in Chinese to describe in Chinese or in English their perceptions of the English classes in elementary school.

Multiple Regression was later applied to pre-test and post-test scores to identify variables that might predict academic success in the elementary school's CLT program.

An important feature of studying English in Taiwan is the popularity of private English language classes. To examine the potential influence that exposure to English in private language centers might have on the children's learning of English in elementary school, the first group of predictors focused on experiences of students in English language centers. The predictor variables of the first group included (1) no experience studying English in a language center. (2) experience studying English in a language center prior to the beginning of the elementary school's English classes only, (3) experience studying English in a language center during the study of English in the elementary school's English classes, and (4) experience studying English in a language center prior to and during the elementary school's English classes.

The second group of predictors focused on the perceptions of children about the elementary school's English classes. The predictor variables of the second group included (1) enjoyment of English classes in elementary school and (2) dislike of English classes in elementary school.

Data from the open-ended surveys were analyzed by the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using this method, comments written by participants were grouped into units, which are the smallest pieces of information that make sense within the context of the inquiry. The units of a category were counted to gain insight into the strength or weakness of a category. To ensure that the categories were developed from a reasonable interpretation of units, both researchers participated in the analysis of qualitative data.

RESULTS

The Second Language Oral Test of English

As Table 1 shows, a T-test comparison of SLOTE pre-test and post-test scores indicates that the 134 students tested on oral skills made statistically significant progress in the development of their English oral skills during the 3 years of the study.

Table 1

Summary of Two-tailed T-test Comparisons for SLOTE Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Variables	M	SD	T	Sig
SLOTE Pre-test	2.06	3.77		
SLOTE Post-test	16.48	7.43		
Pre-test/Post-test Comparison			23.42	.000

Note: N=134; df=133

According to the results of the Regression Analysis of the SLOTE that are presented in Table 2, the most influential negative predictors of the criterion variable post-test were No Language Center Experience, Prior Language Center Experience, and Dislike English classes. This means that students who were more likely to have no language center experience with English or language center experience in English only prior to the study were less likely to do well on the post-test, as were students who disliked English classes by the end of the study.

Table 2

Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting SLOTE Performance

Variables (2 Groups)	B	SE B	Beta
Language Center (LC) Experience			
No LC Experience	-7.33	6.62	-0.47
Prior LC Experience	-5.41	6.68	-0.26
Simultaneous LC Experience	-0.61	6.63	-0.04
Prior & Simultaneous LC Experience	-1.52	6.52	-0.09

Table 2 (Continued)

Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting SLOTE Performance

Variables	B	SE B	Beta
Perceptions of English			
Enjoy English Classes	0	0	0
Dislike English Classes	-2.17	1.47	-0.11

Note: N=134; df=133; R^2=.28

In short, it appears likely that the students who were enrolled in English language centers while they were studying English in elementary school developed stronger oral communication skills. However, those who disliked their elementary school English classes appeared to do less well.

The Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery-Revised

Reading. Two reading clusters are included from the WLPB-R: Broad Reading and Reading Comprehension. The Broad Reading cluster includes tests of Letter-Word Identification and Passage Comprehension. Table 3 compares pre-test and post-test scores for this cluster. It also shows that the T-test found statistically significant differences.

Table 3

Summary of Two-tailed Comparisons for Woodcock Broad Reading Scores

Variables	M	SD	T	Sig
Broad Reading Pre-test	367.75	18.00		
Broad Reading Post-test	446.11	17.35		
Pre-test/Post-test Comparison			30.32	.000

Note: N=53; df=52

Findings of the Regression Analysis of the WLPB-R's Broad Reading Cluster are presented in Table 4. The strongest negative predictors of the criterion variable post-test were for No Language Center Experience, Prior Language Center Experience, and Dislike English classes. These results suggest that students who did not study English in

language centers at all or did not study English in them while enrolled in the elementary school English program were more likely to score lower on the Broad Reading cluster. Those who reported disliking English classes in the elementary school by the end of this study were more likely not to do well on this cluster. Furthermore, Simultaneous Language Center Experience proved to be a fairly strong positive predictor of the criterion variable.

Table 4

Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Woodcock Broad Reading Performance

Variables (2 Groups)	B	SE B	Beta
Language Center (LC) Experience			
No LC Experience	-11.50	6.49	-0.31
Prior LC Experience	-8.95	6.60	-0.22
Simultaneous LC Experience	4.39	7.08	0.10
Prior & Simultaneous LC Experience	0	0	0
Perceptions of English			
Enjoy English Classes	0	0	0
Dislike English Classes	-6.08	5.44	-0.14

Note: N=53; df=52; R^2=.31

The WLPB-R's Reading Comprehension cluster consists of tests that measure passage comprehension and reading vocabulary. The T-test comparison of pre-test and post-test scores of this cluster are shown in Table 5. As in previous T-test comparisons, there were statistically significant differences between pre-test and post-test scores.

Table 5

Summary of Two-tailed T-test Comparisons for Woodcock Reading Comprehension Scores

Variables	M	SD	T	Sig
Reading Comprehension Pre-test	421.40	17.30		
Reading Comprehension Post-test	460.38	11.33		
Pre-test/Post-test Comparison			15.82	.000

Note: N=53; df=52

Table 6 presents the results of the Regression Analysis of the WLPB-R's Reading Comprehension cluster. The strongest negative predictors of the criterion variable post-test were No Language Center Experience, Prior Language Center Experience, and Dislike English Classes.

Table 6

Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Woodcock Reading Comprehension Performance

Variables (2 Groups)	B	SE B	Beta
Language Center (LC) Experience			
No LC Experience	-10.16	3.90	-0.42
Prior LC Experience	-7.93	4.07	-0.30
Simultaneous LC Experience	1.11	4.42	0.04
Prior & Simultaneous LC Experience	0	0	0
Perceptions of English			
Enjoy English Classes	0	0	0
Dislike English Classes	-3.65	3.56	-0.13

Note: N=53; df=52; R^2=.31

As the data on the reading clusters show, those who either studied English in language centers before elementary school English classes began or those who did not attend any English classes in language centers appeared to be at a disadvantage in learning how to read. Those who disliked their elementary school English classes also appeared to be at a disadvantage in learning how to read.

Writing. In the Broad Written Language cluster of the WLPB-R, the students were measured for their performance in tests of Dictation and Writing. As Table 7 shows, a T-test comparison of pre-test and post-test results reveals that the students made statistically significant improvement.

Table 7

Summary of Two-tailed T-test Comparisons for Woodcock Broad Writing Scores

Variables	M	SD	T	Sig
Broad Writing Pre-test	305.04	30.10		
Broad Writing Post-test	440.85	20.32		
Pre-test/Post-test Comparison			30.94	.000

Note: N=53; df=52

Results of the Regression Analysis of Broad Writing Performance are presented in Table 8. The strongest positive predictors of the criterion variable post-test were for Simultaneous Language Center Experience and for Prior and Simultaneous Language Center Experience. This suggests that students who studied English in language centers while they were learning English in the elementary school were most likely to improve on the Broad Writing cluster. In addition, Dislike English Classes was the strongest negative predictor, suggesting that students who disliked English classes in elementary school by the end of the study were less likely to improve on this cluster.

Table 8

Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Woodcock Broad Writing Performance

Variables (2 Groups)	B	SE B	Beta
Language Center (LC) Experience			
No LC Experience	0	0	0
Prior LC Experience	8.40	6.99	0.18
Simultaneous LC Experience	22.20	7.05	0.45
Prior & Simultaneous LC Experience	18.59	7.11	0.41
Perceptions of English			
Enjoy English Classes	0	0	0
Dislike English Classes	-8.28	6.50	-0.17

Note: N=53; df=52; R^2=.30

The WLPB-R's Written Expression cluster includes tests of Writing Samples and Writing Fluency. In Table 9, the T-test comparison of pre-test and post-test scores within this cluster shows statistically significant difference.

Table 9

Summary of Two-tailed T-test Comparisons for Woodcock Written Expression Scores

Variables	M	SD	T	Sig
Written Expression Pre-test	410.00	0		
Written Expression Post-test	450.49	14.88		
Pre-test/Post-test Comparison			19.81	.000

Note: N=53; df=52

The results of the Regression Analysis of the WLPB-R's Written Expression cluster are shown in Table 10. The strongest negative predictors of the criterion variable post-test were for No Language Experience, Prior Language Center Experience, and Dislike English Classes.

Table 10

Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Woodcock Written Expression Performance

Variables (2 Groups)	B	SE B	Beta
Language Center (LC) Experience			
No LC Experience	-15.67	4.97	-0.49
Prior LC Experience	-9.41	5.56	-0.27
Simultaneous LC Experience	0.77	5.38	0.02
Prior & Simultaneous LC Experience	0	0	0
Perceptions of English			
Enjoy English Classes	0	0	0
Dislike English Classes	-4.92	4.80	-0.14

Note: N=53; df=52; R^2=.28

As the data on writing show, Prior Language Center Experience, Simultaneous Language Center Experience, and Prior and Simultaneous Language Center Experience were strong positive predictors of the Broad Written Language cluster. Hence, it appears that language center experience in simultaneous combination with elementary school English classes did help to improve the learning of writing, especially skills involving dictation and writing short samples.

In contrast, this study did not find any positive predictors for the Written Expression cluster, which included the only test of writing fluency. Nevertheless, those who either studied English in language centers before elementary school English classes began or those who did not attend any English classes in language centers appeared to be at a disadvantage.

In addition, those who disliked their English classes in elementary school appeared to show less improvement in writing, as determined by the WLPB-R.

Qualitative Surveys

In Table 11, the opinions of the English classes from the 134 students who completed the SLOTE are presented in quantitative form. Most of the students (65%) reported to either like their English classes in elementary school or to like them very much.

Table 11

Summary of Qualitative Survey for the Perceptions of Students about the Enjoyment of English in Elementary School Classes

Categories of Units	Units	%
Like English Classes Very Much	6	4.4
Like English Classes	83	60.6
Like English Classes a Little	19	16.1
Do Not Like English Classes	26	19.0
Total	134	100

In Table 12, the top-5 reasons offered by 134 students in the open-ended surveys for liking the English classes of elementary school are presented. Many of the students surveyed cited the availability of interesting activities and the opportunity to play games in class as two important reasons for liking their English lessons. Also noteworthy is that 10 students specifically mentioned that they liked their Taiwanese (as opposed to foreign-born) English teachers.

Table 12

Summary of Qualitative Data for the Perceptions of Students about the Reasons for Enjoying Elementary School English Classes

Categories of Units	Numbers of Units	Percentages
Interesting Activities	48	36.6
Playing Games in Class	29	22.1
Learning Another Language	25	19.1
Learning in Lessons Easy to Understand	19	14.5
Learning from Taiwanese English Teachers	10	7.6
Total	131	100

The top-5 reasons for disliking elementary school English classes are presented in Table 13. Twelve students complained about boring classes and 11 complained about the rapid pace of learning the material. Furthermore, it is rather surprising to see that 12 students complained about having to learn English from foreign-born English teachers. Among this latter group, 4 students wrote on their open-ended surveys that the foreign-born teachers were boring, 3 that they were difficult to understand in class, and 2 that they were sometimes impatient with students.

Table 13

Summary of Qualitative Data for the Perceptions of Students about the Reasons for Disliking Elementary School English Classes

Categories of Units	Numbers of Units	Percentages
Learning in Boring Classes	12	25.5
Learning from Foreign-born English Teachers	12	25.5
Learning Material Too Quickly	11	23.4
Taking Frequent Tests	6	12.8
Writing Too Much Homework	6	12.8
Total	47	100

Taken as a whole, the data of this section show that most of the students reported enjoying their elementary school English classes. They especially appreciated the interesting tasks and games. Nonetheless, some of the students disliked their English

classes, finding them boring. Several students reported dissatisfaction with the performance of the foreign-born English teachers.

IMPLICATIONS

Now we would like to answer each of the research questions posed at the beginning of this paper that guided the study. The fourth research question, which asked about potential implications of this study for the teaching of English in Taiwan, will be answered within the context of the first three.

The First Research Question

We found that the students enrolled in the CLT program of the Science-based Park's Experimental School English program did improve in the development of all examined aspects of their English language skills. This is evidence to show that CLT can be effectively implemented in a Taiwanese elementary school. The pre-test and post-test comparisons of means using the T-test clearly show this. Nonetheless, after finishing the 3-year program, the students still needed much more English language training. Hence, it is unrealistic for educators and the public to expect CLT programs in elementary schools to accomplish miracles. For example, the pre-test mean of the SLOTE was 2.06 and the post-test mean was 16.43, showing a substantial, statistically significant gain in scores. However, both of these means still fall clearly within the band of scores labeled by the SLOTE as beginning level. The situation was similar with progress recorded on the WLPB-R.

The Second Research Question

We found that several variables did appear to influence strongly the learning of English by Taiwanese children in elementary school. Those who never attended English

classes in language centers appeared to be disadvantaged in developing their English in nearly every skill area. The English development of those children who had only studied English in language centers just prior to the beginning of the elementary school English classes was not much better. In contrast, those who were enrolled in English classes in language centers while they were taking English classes in elementary school appeared to receive most benefit. These findings suggest the need for elementary schools to develop and to encourage children to attend affordable after-school English lessons to supplement regularly scheduled English class offerings, especially when the regular English classes are limited to just 2-3 hours per week.

Another finding here is that Dislike of English Classes in elementary school appeared to be a very strong predictor of success in learning English. Those who were dissatisfied consistently under-performed other children in all skill areas. This pattern rather clearly suggests that motivating children to want to perform well in elementary school English classes should be a primary goal of any elementary school instructional program.

The Third Research Question

Most of the students reported enjoying their CLT English classes in elementary school. However, there were some unpopular aspects of the elementary school's English teaching program that needed improvement.

Several of those who did not like their English classes complained that the lessons were boring. Although most of the teachers in this study labored hard to include a variety of activities in their teaching, not all of the children appeared to be interested. To provide children with as stimulating and as challenging a learning environment as possible, it

appears that strong and systematic efforts must be made by teachers to include a wide range of tasks.

Perhaps the Science-based Park's Experimental School might have encouraged teachers to develop and to share more of their CLT tasks and materials by locating an English teaching resource center within a fixed location and with ready access for all teachers. Such a resource center might have included organized files of favorite lesson plans, numerous books on CLT methodology, commercially prepared videotapes to demonstrate CLT, and internet access to on-line pedagogical sites.

Another area needing improvement involves the potential hiring of native speakers of English to teach in Taiwanese elementary schools. Several of those who disliked their English classes mentioned this reason for their dissatisfaction. In contrast, none of the children complained about having to learn English from the Taiwanese English teachers.

There are several potential explanations of this phenomenon. The American English teachers were not as well prepared academically to teach English to children as were their Taiwanese colleagues. In addition, two of the five American teachers were part-time teachers of the school who spent much of their time teaching in private classes in various locations around town. Consequently, they did not spend very much time at the school and did not have much opportunity to interact with students and colleagues. Because of their isolation, they had less opportunity to share ideas with colleagues and less opportunity to develop a personal, informal rapport with students.

If native speakers of English are to be hired to teach some elementary school classes in Taiwan, it would seem prudent to hire only those who are truly academically qualified to teach English to children. Minimal qualifications might include state-recognized

certifications in EFL/ESL teaching. Preferred academic qualifications might include graduate degrees in EFL/ESL teaching, English teaching, or applied linguistics. Perhaps the Ministry of Education might consider helping elementary schools to recruit and to place academically qualified foreign English teachers from reputable sources, such as job fairs sponsored by international language teaching professional organizations.

FURTHER RESEARCH

This study took place within the Science-based Park's Experimental School of Hsin Chu, an elite institution provided for the children of parents who work within the Science-based Park. Future research might examine how students of other elementary schools within Taiwan respond to CLT.

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